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Aristotle's "Second Man" Argument

THEODORE SCALTSAS

"We must inquire whether each thing and its essence are the same or different" (*Metaphysics* Z, 6, 1031a15-16). This is the goal Aristotle sets himself in what is probably the most profound, and no less perplexing, chapter of Book Z of his *Metaphysics*, which is dedicated to the examination of substance. In Chapter Z, 6, Aristotle offers his final response to the Platonic ontology, arguing that each thing is a nature; for Plato, far from *being* a nature, a thing does not even *have* a nature. Aristotle initially developed the categorial system in which objects *have* natures; but in *Metaphysics* Z, 6 he put forward an argument showing that any distinction between a subject and its essence or nature will lead to metaphysical predicament. His argument in Z, 6 is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the claim that a thing's essence is different from that thing. It is a regress argument which, despite its centrality, has not attracted anywhere near the attention that the Third Man Argument commands in the literature, probably because it seems to be a straightforward derivation of an infinite series that proliferates the essences of substances. I believe that the argument is more complex than the brevity of Aristotle's presentation suggests, and I will argue that the regress is not a benign proliferation of the ontology, but is in fact a vicious regress stemming from logically incompatible premises.¹ Aristotle's result is not peculiar to his theory, but is a metaphysical claim

¹ Among commentators that have located the problem in the infinite number of the generated essences are Alexander of Aphrodisias *In Aristotelis Metaphysica*, ed. M. Hayduck (Berlin, Germany: George Reimer, 1891) 484.34-485.30; Asclepius, *In Metaphysicorum*, ed. M. Hayduck (Berlin, Germany: George Reimer, 1888) 394.35-395.1, 395.30-31; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, transl. J.P. Rowan (Chicago, Ill.: Library of Living Catholic Thought, Henry Regnery Co., 1961) 1376; W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1924) v. II, p. 176; M. Burnyeat and others, *Notes on Z* (Oxford, England: Sub-faculty of Philosophy, Oxford University, 1979) p. 42; M. Frede and G. Patzig, *Aristoteles 'Metaphysik Z'*, (Munich, Germany: Verlag, 1988) vol. 2, p. 102; T.H. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1988) p. 219; E. Halper, *One and Many in Aristot-*

that commands respect in any metaphysical system,² warning against any sort of ontological gap between a substance and its nature.³

The Nature-Feature Problem.

One of the problems that Plato attempted to resolve by the introduction of the Theory of Forms is Zeno's paradox. Namely, to explain how like things can be unlike, and more generally, how opposites can belong to opposites.⁴ Plato's solution was a qualified acceptance of the copresence of opposites. By that I mean that his metaphysics makes it possible for opposites to be copresent in the same subject in the physical world, but impossible for opposites to belong to one another in the world of Forms. Thus, Socrates can be like and unlike,⁵ or large and small,⁶ by partaking of opposite Forms

le's Metaphysics (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1989) p. 82; M.J. Loux, *Primary Ousia: An Essay on Aristotle's Metaphysics Z and H* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991) p. 101.

² I am thus in full agreement with M. Loux's conclusion that "the claim that a primary *ousia* and the fundamental essence in virtue of which it is what it is are necessarily one and the same is theory-neutral. It expresses a constraint on any attempt to pick out the ontologically basic things. Commitment to the Identity Thesis, the Aristotle of Z.6 wants to claim, is a presupposition of doing anything that can genuinely be called metaphysics" (*op. cit.*, p. 94).

³ According to some commentators, Aristotle is not claiming here that particular substance is identical with its essence, but that a universal species form is identical with its essence. Thus, Asclepius, *op. cit.*, 392.1-2, 393.23-24, 397.2; M. Furth, *Substance, Form and Psyche: An Aristotelean Metaphysics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 236; E. Halper, *op. cit.*, p. 88; M. Loux, *op. cit.*, p. 103. According to others, Aristotle is claiming the identity of particular substance (whether individual form or the composite) with its essence. Thus, Alexander, *op. cit.*, 483.18-20; Aquinas, *op. cit.* 1357; W. Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 176; M. Woods, "Substance and Essence in Aristotle", *Aristotelian Society Proceedings* 75 (1974-75) pp. 177-179; E. Hartman, "Aristotle on the Identity of Substance and Essence," *Philosophical Review* LXXXV (1976) p. 545, and *Substance, Body, and Soul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977) pp. 58-59, 62-63, 73; Frede and Patzig, *op. cit.* p. 87; T. Irwin, *op. cit.*, p. 218. Finally, according to J. Lear, *Aristotle: the desire to understand* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Aristotle is claiming that the species form is primary substance (p. 280), where the species form is neither particular nor universal (pp. 285-86).

⁴ "If things are many, then it follows that the same things must be both like and unlike; but that is impossible; for unlike things cannot be like or like things unlike" (*Parmenides* 127e1-4).

⁵ "But I find nothing strange, Zeno, if he shows that things which get a share of both [the like and the unlike] undergo both qualifications, nor if he shows that all things are one by reason of having a share in the one, and that those very same things are also in turn many by reason of having a share of multitude" (*Parmenides* 129b3-6).

⁶ "both things are in Simmias, largeness and smallness" (*Phaedo* 102b5-6).

which come to be present in him. But none of the opposite Forms can be its opposite.⁷ E.g., the One cannot be many, nor the Like unlike. In this way, Zeno's restrictions are shifted to the level of the forms away from the level of physical things.

A metaphysical result that follows from Plato's different treatment of the copresence of opposites in the world of Forms and the world of things is that participation in the Forms cannot bestow onto things the nature of the Forms. That is, participation in the Form of the Like cannot bestow to the participant the nature of the Like, for then the participant could not accept the opposite of the Like, and be both like and unlike (any more than the Form of the Like can be unlike). Whatever it is that the thing acquires by participation in the Form of the Like, it cannot be what prohibits the Like from being unlike, since the thing *can* be both like and unlike. This would have been a happy ending, if it were not for the fact that Plato needed within the world of things the very restriction on the copresence of opposites that he allocated *exclusively* to the Forms. To see this, we need to look at the example of the fire in the *Phaedo*.

Plato's treatment of the relation of the hot and the cold to fire in the *Phaedo* is problematic. On the one hand, he wants to be able to explain why the Cold cannot be in a fire, which is hot. On the other hand, he wants to be able to allow that both the large and the small can be in Socrates. Ultimately, he does *not* manage to explain both phenomena. This is not coincidental, but reflects a fundamental shortcoming of the Theory of Forms; namely, that only Forms, not things, are natures.

Plato has only one mechanism in his metaphysics for prohibiting the copresence of opposites: an opposite cannot characterize its opposite. It is only when the opposite is the *subject* that the restriction is operative. Thus the Large cannot be small. On the contrary, Plato's mechanism for allowing for the copresence of opposites is to attach both of them to a subject. Thus, Socrates can be both large and small. Both opposites can be copresent in Socrates because neither of them is said of the other opposite; although "both things are in Simmias, largeness and smallness" (*Phaedo* 102b5-6), "not only is largeness itself never willing to be large and small at the same time, but also . . . the largeness in us never admits the small" (102d6-8).⁸

⁷ "But if he shows that what it is to be one is many, and the many in turn one, that *will* surprise me. The same is true in like manner of all other things. If someone should show that the kinds of characters in themselves undergo these opposite qualifications, there is reason for surprise." (*Parmenides* 129b6-c3)

⁸ Also, "the small that's in us is not willing ever to come to be, or to be, large. Nor will any other of the opposites, while still being what it was, at the same time come to be, and be, its own opposite" (102e6-103a1). See also *Parmenides* 129b6-c3 (note 7 above).

The tension between these two mechanisms surfaces in the case of fire. Fire can be hot only, not cold as well, unlike Socrates who can be both large and small. But why is that? What prohibits the Cold from being in a fire, copresent with the Hot, just like the Large and the Small are copresent in Socrates? Plato introduces the *subtler* reasons to explain this. He says that “not only do the forms that are opposites [e.g. Hot-Cold] not abide each other’s attack; but there are, in addition, certain other things that don’t abide the opposites’ attack” (*Phaedo* 104c7-9); these are “things that are compelled by whatever occupies them [e.g. fire] to have not only its own form, but always the form of some opposite [Hot] as well” (104d1-3).⁹ Yet, this is far from sufficient to explain why a fire cannot accept the Cold. The only thing that the subtler reasons establish is a *necessary connection* between being a fire and being hot. Thus, we can always expect a fire to be hot. But this says nothing about the fire’s being cold or not. Suppose one said that necessarily, every complex organism is large – being larger than its parts; e.g. Socrates will always be large, since he is a complex organism composed of smaller parts. But this is entirely compatible with his also being small. So, although “being an organism” always brings with it being large, the organism can also accept the Small. It follows that the fact that fire is always hot does not provide a reason why it cannot also be cold. Thus Plato’s subtler reasons fail to explain why a fire cannot be cold, why it cannot “abide the opposites’ attack” (*Phaedo* 104c8-9).

We saw that Plato’s only metaphysical mechanism for prohibiting the copresence of opposites is making one of the opposites the subject. None of the opposites will accept its opposite and come to be its opposite.¹⁰ The only way to prohibit a fire from being cold is *for the Hot in the fire to be the subject in the fire*. If the Hot in the fire *is itself* the subject in the fire, rather than being *attached* to the subject, then the Cold could never be present in a fire, since opposites do not characterize opposites. To achieve this in Plato’s metaphysics, participation in the Hot should not just bring the Hot in the participant; rather, it should make the Hot in the participant the *subject* in the participant. Therefore, participation should not introduce a feature in a participating subject, but rather *determine the very nature of the subject*. If participation in the Hot achieved this, then the Cold could not come to be present in the participating thing, since then the Cold would be characterizing its opposite, the Hot, which the Theory prohibits.

⁹ “It is not only the opposite [the Hot] that doesn’t admit its opposite [the Cold]; there is also that [fire] which brings up an opposite [the Hot] into whatever [body] it enters itself; and that thing [fire], the very thing that brings it [the Hot] up, never admits the quality [the Cold] opposed to the one that’s brought up [the Hot].” (*Phaedo* 105a2-5)

¹⁰ *Phaedo* 102d6-8, 102e6-103a1, *Parmenides* 129b6-c3.

But a problem would then ensue. If participation in an opposite Form determined the nature of the participating subject, then Socrates' participation in the Large would make it impossible for him to also participate in the Small, since then the Small would characterize the Large in Socrates, which Plato explicitly prohibits (*Phaedo* 102d6-8). It follows that Plato cannot allow for participation to determine the nature of the subject (since he wants to allow opposites to be copresent in the subject), and thus cannot explain why a fire cannot be cold.

By the *Timaeus*, Plato has firmly made up his mind not to allow a thing's participation in a Form to determine its nature.

the same argument applies to the universal nature which receives all bodies – that must be always called the same, for, inasmuch as she always receives all things, *she never departs at all from her own nature and never, in any way or at any time, assumes a form like that of any of the things which enter into her*; it is the natural recipient of all impressions, . . . and appears different from time to time by reason of them. But the forms which enter into and go out of it are the likenesses of realities modeled after their patterns . . . (50b5-c5, my emphasis).

Plato can thereby allow things in the world to possess opposites without facing Zenonian paradoxes, since none of these opposites characterize each other as subject; rather, both opposites characterize the participating subject whose nature remains unaltered by participation in the Forms.

Plato came face to face with the nature-feature problem by an unorthodox route: through the difficulties presented by Zeno's paradox and the resolution he gave to it – by allowing two opposites to belong to a subject, but not to each other as subject. The nature-feature problem surfaced as the question of whether participation in a Form determines the nature of the participating subject or simply attaches features to it, leaving its nature unaffected. In the case of things in the world, the nature of the participating subject is impervious to the Forms that are attached to it by participation, for reasons relating to the resolution of Zeno's paradox. In itself, the subject remains different from any feature that belongs to it by participation.

Aristotle's first attempt towards a resolution

That participation leaves the nature of the participating subject unaltered entails that a subject which participates in a substantial Form, e.g. the Form of Human Being, comes to possess the character of Human Being while retaining its *a-human* nature – “never departing at all from its own nature” (50c1-2). Thus paradoxically, in itself, the subject in a human being is not a human being.

In order to introduce the possibility of an ontological distinction between the nature of a subject and its features, Aristotle differentiates between two ways of belonging to a subject in the *Categories*:

Of things there are: some are *said of* a subject . . . For example, man is said of a subject, the individual man . . . Some are *in* a subject . . . (By “in a subject” I mean what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in.) For example, the individual knowledge-of-grammar is in a subject, the soul . . . (1a20-26)

All the other things [apart from primary substances] are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. . . . For example, animal is predicated of man and therefore of individual man; . . . Again, colour is in body and therefore also in an individual body; . . . Thus all the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. . . . For example, animal is predicated of man and therefore also of the individual man; . . . Again, colour is in body and therefore also in an individual body; . . . Thus all the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. (2a34-2b5)

Secondary substances are said of a subject while non-substantial characteristics are in a subject. Non-substantial characteristics belong to a subject in a different way than secondary substances do, and do not determine the nature of the subject they belong to. Secondary substances on the other hand do determine the natures of subjects, i.e. what the primary substances are (*Categories*, 2b29-33). In particular, the relation of “being said of a subject” secures that the name and the definition of what is said of the subject, e.g. “human being”, are predicated of the subject (*Categories* 2a20-24).

But even this distinction between two ways of belonging to a subject still retains one fundamental Platonic position, namely, the subject-nature distinction. In the Aristotle of the *Categories* the distinction is between the primary substance and the secondary substance said of it. The primary substance, Socrates, is the subject, and the secondary substance, being a human being, is its nature, which is “said of the subject”.

Although Aristotle’s categorial scheme allows for a distinction between belonging as a *nature* and belonging as a *feature*, it nevertheless still retains the division between the subject and its nature. Hence, as in Plato’s metaphysics, in itself, the subject is other than what its nature stands for. If there is a *difference* between Socrates and the form of human being, no matter how intimately Socrates might be related to it, he is not it. The very existence of a relation between Socrates and “being a human being”, even if it is the relation of “being said of a subject”, divorces Socrates from it.

A similar situation is generated if the ultimate subject in a substance is Aristotelian matter. The position that Aristotle entertains in *Metaphysics* Z, 3, namely that the matter is the ultimate subject in a substance, would

produce the same problems in the Aristotelian corpus as the Timaeon receptacle generates for Plato. Whether the substratum is the Platonic formless receptacle, or characterless prime matter, the problem remains the same: if the subject is *other* than the forms that belong to it, then the subject itself will not be in its nature what the forms stand for. The subject may be *related* to the forms, in one way or another, but in itself, as it stands on the one side of this relation, it will not be what they are. Thus, if the subject in a substance is different from the nature of the substance, however it may be related to that nature, the subject itself will not be what the nature stands for; e.g. that to which the form “human being” belongs as subject will not, itself, be a human being.

The Resolution

The resolution of the nature-feature problem requires the distinction between two kinds of characteristics: natures and features; but it ultimately rests on the role these characteristics play in a thing. The Aristotle of the *Categories* departed from Plato by introducing a distinction between the nature of a thing and its features. But he still followed Plato in “relating” both the nature, and the features, to the thing (by two different ways of belonging to it). It is the Aristotle of the central books of the *Metaphysics* that realizes that a further departure from Plato is needed; namely, to abandon the *relation* between a subject and its nature by giving the nature the role of the substantial subject itself. He says in *Metaphysics* Z, 6 that

each thing is thought to be not different from its substance, and the essence is said to be the substance of each thing (1031a17-18).

Before coming to the detailed examination of the arguments that establish this result in Z, 6, we should briefly turn to the question of the relation of the present problem to that in the Third Man Argument (TMA). G.E.L. Owen, in his paper “The Platonism of Aristotle”, and M. Woods, in “Substance and Essence in Aristotle”, thought that Aristotle reached his *Metaphysics* Z position as a way of avoiding the TMA by rejecting the Non-Identity Assumption.¹¹ I hope the discussion above has shed enough light on the nature-feature problem, to enable us to see that it is a different problem from the one addressed by the Non-Identity Assumption. We see this more clearly when we realize that the nature-feature problem can be resolved without giving up the Non-Identity Assumption. Furthermore, it

¹¹ G.E.L. Owen, “The Platonism of Aristotle”, British Academy Lecture (1965), reprinted in *Articles on Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, M. Schofield, R. Sorabji (London, England: Duckworth, 1975) vol. I, pp. 21-25. Woods, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-179.

was within Plato's power to resolve it, but he chose (for reasons we reviewed above) to go a different way. Specifically, when in the *Timaeus* Plato opted out for the position that participation in a Form does not change the nature of the partaking subject (see quoted passage above, 50b5-5), he could have gone the opposite way and allowed that, in some cases (namely, in the cases of substantial Forms) participation in a Form determines the nature of the subject. That is, the universal nature which receives all bodies *would depart* from her own nature and *assume* a form like that of the things which enter into her. Thus, participation in the Form of Human Being would turn the very nature of the participating subject into that of a human being. Had Plato made that choice, instead of the opposite one which he in fact made, then a participating subject would change in its very constitution and become, itself, the nature that was introduced by participation in a (substantial) Form.

What is of interest to us in this case is that this would resolve the nature-feature problem, because the participating subject would relinquish its own nature to the one introduced by participation in the (substantial) Form, so that it would itself become that nature. But this identification of the subject to the nature introduced by participation in the Form need not be incompatible with the Non-Identity Assumption. Plato could allow that the Immanent (substantial) Form become the subject in the thing as a result of participation, while still retaining the difference between the Form and its instantiations (Immanent Forms). Giving up the Non-Identity Assumption would require a further step; namely, not only should there be no metaphysical gap between the subject and the nature of a thing, but there should be no metaphysical gap between a Form and its instantiations, i.e. between the universal nature and the nature of a thing. Even if the subject in a thing becomes identical to the Immanent Form as a result of participation, the Immanent Form can still be different from the Form – hence, Non-Identity. But Non-Identity, along with Self-Predication, would generate the Third Man regress. So, the identification of the subject with its nature need not be the identification of the subject with the Form, and hence, need not be the rejection of the Non-Identity Assumption of the Third Man, which is what G.E.L. Owen and M. Woods have taken it to be. Having resolved the nature-feature problem by the subject-nature identification, one would still be free to tell a further story about the relation of the substance to the universal form. Z, 6's target is the identification of a thing with its *own nature*, not with the *universal forms*. As we shall see, this is required for a substance to be a *καθ' αὐτό* (*kath' hauto*) entity, namely an entity that is what it is in virtue of itself, rather than in virtue of something different from it, and related to it.

A final note. Understanding Aristotle's Z, 6 claim that each entity is identical to its nature gives rise to difficulties, regardless of how the claim is interpreted. One way to understand it is to assume that Aristotle is identifying the universal species form of a substance (e.g. "human being") with its nature or essence. This reading makes the identification unproblematic, since it is a definable form that is identified with its essence. But it fails to pay justice to the Aristotelian position that a substance is what it is in virtue of *itself*, since it retains the ontological difference between Socrates and his essence. Another way of interpreting the Aristotelian identity claim is that the individual substantial form of a substance is identical to the substance's essence, and that in turn to the substance itself. But this position faces the following problems; first, that the individual essence is different from the universal essence; second, that the individual essence is not definable, while essence, according to Aristotle, is; and third, that the substance (e.g. Socrates) is the individual form, and not the composite of matter and form which includes his flesh and bones. Finally, one can interpret Aristotle in Z, 6, as identifying the composite substance, e.g. Socrates, with its essence, so that no ontological relation is required to bond substance to essence. This avoids the last problem, since the substance here is the composite of matter and form. It further explains why the substance is what it is in virtue of *itself*. But it reinstates the problem of the relation between the substance and the universal essence (species form), a successful resolution of which will have to accommodate the Aristotelian positions of the definability of essence, and the non-materiality of essence.

I will not address these issues here, but only say that I have argued for the third option.¹² Each of these options faces difficulties with Aristotle's epistemological or metaphysical commitments. Each proposed solution involves emphasizing one or other of Aristotle's commitments as more central than the rest, and producing acceptable readings of the remaining

¹² I have argued for the third option in *Substances and Universals in Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Cornell University Press, forthcoming) ch. 6. Variants of the above positions with criticism of the alternatives have been put forward in the commentaries mentioned in note 3 above. Further discussion can be found in G.E.L. Owen, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-25, and "Particular and General", *Aristotelian Society Proceedings* 79 (1978-79) pp. 3, 12-16; S. Marc Cohen, "Individual and Essence in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*," *Paideia: Special Aristotle Issue* (1978) pp. 82-84; A. Code, "On the Origins of some Aristotelian Theses about Predication", in *How Things Are*, ed. J. Bogen and J.E. McGuire (Boston, Mass.: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985) pp. 119-123; J. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1957) pp. 220-222; and J. Whiting, "Form and Individuation in Aristotle", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3 (1986) pp. 369-73. A very useful review of the alternative positions is given in Loux, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-108.

ones, even if slightly strained. In what follows I assume the minimum of what is required for the resolution of the nature-feature problem, namely that Aristotle is identifying a substance with its essence, and leave it open whether the substance is taken to be the individual form or the composite.

The Regress

Aristotle argues for the identity of a substance and its essence in *Metaphysics* Z, 6 through an infinite regress argument, as well as five further arguments. We shall refer to the regress as the “Second Man” Argument (SMA), because it posits a second substance, given a first, namely the essence of the first substance (unlike the “Third Man” Argument, which posits a third substance, given two similar substances). Aristotle gives the regress argument in the following:

The absurdity [of the separation of a substance from its essence] would appear also if one were to assign a name to each of the essences; for there would be another essence, besides the original one, e.g. to the essence of horse there will belong a second essence. (1031b28-30)

. . . if they [i.e. the essence of one and the one] were different, the process would go on to infinity; for we should have the essence of one, and the one, so that in their case also *the same* argument would be found. Clearly, then, each primary and self-subsistent thing is one and the same as its essence. (1032a2-6, my emphasis)

In the case of the essence of horse, an infinite regress is not mentioned, but is alluded to in “the *same* argument would be found”. A regress is generated, driven by the principle that an essence has an essence, to which the premises are committed. *Notes on Zeta* takes Aristotle’s argument about the horse (1031b28-30) to be different from the infinite regress, reaching the conclusion that the essence of horse will have an essence of its own. They say: “In (1) [1031b28-30] the absurdity was that horse generates an essence of its essence, here that it generates an infinite chain of essences”.¹³ I do not see why *Notes on Zeta* think there is something absurd about the claim that an essence has an essence; especially since Aristotle is explicitly assuming in the argument of the essence of a horse that essence is substance (1031b31-32). Further, on the very principle on which the essence of a horse will have an essence, the latter essence will have an essence, too, and so on to infinity. So why does *Notes on Zeta* not find a regress in the example of the essence of horse? Aquinas, also, does not see this argument (regarding the essence of horse) as an infinite regress argument, although his recon-

¹³ Burnyeat, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

struction of it is not complete.¹⁴ Code thinks that a regress can be derived, but that nevertheless Aristotle is not making that point here. Rather, he takes Aristotle to be pointing to an absurdity that is generated by the claim that the essence of horse is different from the essence of the essence of horse (*op. cit.*, p. 121). Yet, Code does not offer a satisfactory justification of the absurdity claim.¹⁵ Alexander takes the argument to lead to an infinite

¹⁴ Aquinas says: “a horse is something having the essence of a horse. Now, if this differs from a horse, this will have a different name, and let us call it A. Therefore, since A is a thing, it will have an essence different from itself, just as horse does. Thus this thing which constitutes the being of a horse will have a different essence. But this is clearly false. Now this argument proceeds in the same way with regard to the quiddity as the first argument did with regard to the Ideas” (*op. cit.*, 1374). It is very difficult to understand why Aquinas claims that the thing which is the being of a horse cannot have a different essence. He certainly does not allude to an infinite regress as the problem. His reference to the “first argument with regard to the Ideas” is not very helpful either. The reason is that Aristotle’s first argument (*Metaphysics*, 1031a28-1031b3) concludes, according to Aquinas, that the Platonists will have to admit substances which “will constitute the essence of these Ideas and will be prior to them” (*op. cit.*, 1362). But, even if this were problematic for the Platonists, it is not evident yet that it would be for Aristotle who does allow (before coming to the subject matter of Z, 6) that the essence of a substance is prior to the substance (*Metaphysics*, 1029a29-32). Further, we cannot be illuminated by the subsequent arguments (starting at *Metaphysics*, 1031b3) about the Ideas as to what Aquinas takes the falsehood to be. The reason is that Aquinas attributes to Aristotle a distinction between the claim that the substance is different from its essence, and the claim that the substance is separate from its essence (1363). The subsequent arguments about Ideas are premised, according to Aquinas, by the stronger claim of the separation of a substance from its essence. But the argument about the essence of horse (*Metaphysics*, 1031b28-30) only assumes, according to Aquinas, the difference between the substance and its essence.

So it is difficult to unravel Aquinas’ reasons for claiming that the thing which is the being of horse cannot be different from its essence. Especially since they must be reasons which are transferable back to the initial substance and its essence, since the conclusion is, not that an essence is the same as its essence, but that each thing is the same as its essence. Hence, the reasons for the identity cannot be peculiar to an *essence*, but must apply to any substance.

¹⁵ Code supplies an argument for Aristotle, to show that the essence of horse is identical to the essence of the essence of horse (*ibid.*, p. 122). He argues that the definition of the essence of horse will be the same as the definition of the essence of the essence of horse. From this, plus the claim that the essence of something is just what is signified by the definition of the essence, he concludes that essences that share the same definition are one and the same entity. But this assumes that for essences, qualitative identity entails numerical identity. Frank Lewis agrees with Code and uses this principle in his analysis of the same passage in Z, 6, in “Plato’s Third Man Argument and the ‘Platonism’ of Aristotle”, in *How Things Are*, *op. cit.*, p. 161. He formalizes (and strengthens) the claim: “x is the definition of y, only if $y = x$ ”. Both commentators base their claim on passages in *Topics* A, 7 (Code, p. 113, Lewis, p. 174), where Aristotle says that if two things are not the same they cannot have the same definition (102a13-14). They under-

regress.¹⁶ So do Frede and Patzig, who include the term ἵππῳ (of horse), which was excised from the text by Bonitz and all subsequent commentators. The resulting regress, then, is a regress of essences of horse: “Denn dan würde es noch zusätzlich zu jedem “Was es heisst, dies zu sein” ein weiteres geben, etwa für das “Was es heisst, ein Pferd zu sein” ein weiteres “Was es heisst, ein Pferd zu sein”” (1031b29-30). From this they conclude that “das Unsinnige der Konstruktion einer aufsteigenden Reihe von “Was es heisst, dies zu sein” liegt für Aristoteles gerade darin, dass es sich um einen unendlichen Regress handelt, der ausserdem nicht von der Stelle kommt.”¹⁷ But again, no absurdity has been demonstrated. Proliferation is unwelcome, but in itself it is not absurd. Irwin does not take the sequence of essences to be a sequence of infinitely many of the same entity – i.e. that each essence of essence . . . of horse collapses to the essence of horse. But he does locate the absurdity in the infinity of the series;¹⁸ so does Alexander, also.¹⁹

stand sameness in terms of numerical oneness, because Aristotle says that the term “the same” is used “in a sense agreed on by everyone when applied to what is numerically one” (103a23-24). But this evidence is not sufficient to support the claim that sameness of definition entails numerical identity. They seem to ignore Aristotle’s statements in the *Metaphysics*, to the effect that “some things are one in number, others in species . . . in number those whose matter is one, in species those whose definition is one . . . things that are one in species are not all one in number” (1016b31-36). Furthermore, there is a long tradition of commentators who attribute the opposite view to Aristotle, in the doctrine of individual forms. (For an exhaustive survey of the contemporary discussion, see T. Irwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 569-70.) Most recently, M. Frede argues that Aristotle is committed to individual forms, and says about them: “But if it should be demanded that there be something about the form in and by itself which distinguishes it from other forms of the same kind, the answer is that there is no such distinguishing mark, and that there is no need for one”, in “Substance in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, in *Aristotle on Nature and Living Things*, ed. A. Gotthelf (Pittsburgh, Penn., Mathesis Publications, Inc., 1985) pp. 23-24. Hence (and more generally), the grounds on which commentators attribute individual substantial forms to Aristotle are grounds for denying that Aristotle believed that sameness of definition entails numerical oneness; but this is the assumption made by Code and Lewis for the justification of the absurdity claim in their reading of Z, 6.

¹⁶ Alexander, *op. cit.*, 484.35-37.

¹⁷ Frede and Patzig, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Irwin, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

¹⁹ In fact, Alexander believes that one might try to avoid the absurdity by avoiding the infinity, by assuming that the series will not extend to infinity but will end at some point in an entity which is not different from its essence. And he thinks that Aristotle had this objection in mind when he counter-objected (according to Alexander): “why should not some things be essences from the start, since essence is substance?” (*op. cit.*, 1031b31-32). The rationale attributed to Aristotle by Alexander here is that, if some entity along the line will be the same with its essence, it might as well be the first one – thus dispensing with the series of essences altogether (485.6-16). This shows that, according to Alexan-

It makes no difference whether the substances in question are Platonic Forms, e.g. of the One or of Horse, or physical substances, e.g. a horse or a human being. All that matters is that the initial entity be a substance. Within the context of Z, 6, to be a substance is to be a primary and *kath' hauto* entity.²⁰ These are the entities which are said to be what they are, and are what they are, in virtue of themselves; they are “substances which have no other substances nor entities prior to them” (1031a28-30); and are “things which do not depend on something else but are self-subsistent and primary” (1031b13-14). In the case of substances, says Aristotle, if the substance is other than its essence, an infinite regress will follow.

Our first concern here will be to establish the premises from which the regress follows. We just saw that the argument concerns substances, namely, things which are what they are in virtue of themselves. For example, a tree is a tree in virtue of itself, but a green thing is not green in virtue of itself, but in virtue of, e.g., its being a tree. It is green because it is a tree and trees are green. But it is not a tree because it is some further thing, which in its turn is a tree. There is no further cause to which one can appeal to explain why a tree is a tree, other than the tree's being what it is; it has “no other substances nor entities prior to [it]” (1031a29-30), and does not “depend on something else, but . . . [is] self-subsistent and primary” (1031b13-14). So, an initial assumption of the argument is that there are substances, namely, *f* things which are *f* in virtue of themselves (Existential Premise).

Two further assumptions are that a substance has an essence (Essentialist Premise), and (the premise under contention in the argument) that essences are different from their substances (Non-Identity). Thus, in the case of a horse, its nature of being a horse is different from the horse.²¹

The Non-Identity claim is expressed in three different instances throughout Z, 6. Once as a subject of inquiry, and twice as an assumption in the arguments, the last being the Second Man Argument. Aristotle expresses it in terms of difference: “We must inquire whether a thing and its essence are the same or *different* [ἐτερον]” (1031a15-16); “if the essence of good is to be *different* [ἐτερον] from the Idea of good, . . .” (1031a31-32,); “if they [the One and its essence] were *different* [ἄλλο] . . .” (1032a2-3, my emphas-

der, what is objectionable is the infinity of the generated essences. He thinks that the difficulty is avoided if the series is made finite, and the series can then be dispensed with on grounds of ontological parsimony. But we shall see that the difficulty persists even if there are only finitely many essences in a substance.

²⁰ *Metaphysics*, 1031a28, 1031b13-14, 1032a5.

²¹ This Non-Identity Assumption, as we already saw, concerns the relation of the substance to its essence, leaving open the relation of the essence to the universal form.

es). We need to assume, therefore, that a substance is a different entity from its essence.

Finally, there is one more assumption that Aristotle is operating on throughout the chapter; it is that the essence of a thing is itself substance. This premise appears three times in the text. First, in the introduction, where he says that “the essence is said to be the substance of each thing” (1031a18). But more directly, in the context of the regress he says “since essence is substance” (1031b31-32). Finally, we can understand the sense in which essence is substance from the third occurrence of this claim in the chapter. Here Aristotle introduces the hypothesis that “essence is substance” (1031b2-3), having just described substances as *kath’ hauto* entities with “no other substances nor entities prior to them” (1031a29-20), but being what they are in virtue of themselves. This is the sense in which essences are substances; they do not need to be physically separate, in the way that concrete substances are; rather, they have to satisfy the substancehood criterion of being *kath’ hauto* entities, being what they are in virtue of themselves.

The assumption that essence is substance is vital, because without it Aristotle could not derive the regress. The derivation of the regress requires that an essence be the type of entity that has an essence: “to the essence of horse there will belong a second essence” (1031b30). But it is substances, namely primary entities with a nature (which are what they are in virtue of themselves rather than being a complex of one thing said of another thing), that paradigmatically have essences (1030a6-13, 1030a29-30, b5-6). So the assumption that essence is substance secures that essences are the kind of entity that have essence, which generates the regress.²²

We can now state the premises of the Second Man Argument and derive the regress. (The expression “what it is to be an *f*” designates the essence of a substance which is an *f* in virtue of itself.) The operative definition of substance is:

²² Here I disagree with M. Loux who says that in Z, 6, Aristotle is not committed to the premiss that “essence is *ousia*” because “that is precisely what Z, 6 is meant to establish” (*op. cit.*, p. 99). But Aristotle must be committed to that premise, in the sense of “*ousia*” just explained, if the regress is to be generated. Being committed to the premise that essence is substance does not entail that the essence of a substance is identical to the substance. All the premise claims is that an essence is the type of entity that has a nature of its own, and is in that sense a substance; this leaves it open whether it is identical to the substance it belongs to or not. It is the latter question that is the target of Z, 6, not the former, as Loux assumes.

Definition: A substance is an entity that is an f in virtue of itself.

The “Second Man” Argument:

Existential Premise: There are substances.

Essentialist Premise: If an f is a substance, there is an $f_1 =$ what it is to be an f .

Non-Identity: The f is different from the f_1 .

Essence Substantiality: The f_1 is a substance.

On the basis of these premises we can now derive the regress. By the Existential premise, there are substances. By the Essentialist Premise, given an f , which is a substance, there is an $f_1 =$ what it is to be an f . By Non-Identity, the f_1 is different from the f . By Essence Substantiality, the f_1 is a substance. Hence, by the Essentialist Premise, there will be an $f_2 =$ what it is to be an f_1 . By Non-Identity, the $f_2 \neq$ the f_1 . By Essence Substantiality, the f_2 is a substance, and so on *ad infinitum*.²³

The Second Man’s Vice

Aristotle takes this result to establish the conclusion that “Clearly, then, each primary and self-subsistent thing is one and the same as its essence” (1032a4-6). But the question arises, why should this conclusion follow? What exactly is the offending element in the Second Man Argument (SMA) that forces this conclusion upon us? It might be thought that Aristotle takes the regress argument to require the actuality of the infinite – e.g. for Hoofty to be a horse, there should be an infinity of substances, one being the essence of the other. If so, it might be thought that Aristotle objects to this result because he does not believe there are actual infinities. But I do not think this is the difficulty at hand. After all, Aristotle did not object to every human having a human parent, which generates a benign infinite regress. Independently of Aristotle’s reasons for rejecting the conclusion of the argument, it is of intrinsic philosophical interest whether the regress of the SMA is a benign or a vicious one, and what conclusions one might draw from it, especially if one is not opposed to the actuality of the infinite. I

²³ It is of course understood that Aristotle is assuming that if f_1 is the essence of f , then f is not the essence of f_1 (where $f_1 \neq f$). The reason is that it would be metaphysically nonsensical for an essence to belong (as an essence) to what belonged to it (as an essence)! In general, no items in the series reappear further along the series. The question of metaphysical interest for Aristotle is whether an item recurred consecutively in the series, but this is here denied by the Non-Identity premise.

believe that the infinite regress in the SMA is not benign but vicious; I shall argue, in what follows, that the premises of the SMA are inconsistent; further, that Aristotle saw them as such, for which reason he takes the SMA to be a *reductio* proof that the non-identity claim between a substance and its essence is false.

An indication that Aristotle must have associated the result of the SMA with an *impossibility* can be found in the arguments that he offers earlier on in Z, 6 against the substance-essence separation. There are five arguments, not all of which have the same philosophical generality. Aristotle uses as examples of substance the Platonic Forms and assumes that they are different from their essences, which are, themselves, substances. The first three arguments are given in the following:

If the essence of good is different from the Idea of good, and the essence of animal from the Idea of animal, and the essence of being from the Idea of being, there will, firstly, be other substances and entities and Ideas besides those which are asserted, and secondly, these others will be prior substances if the essence is substance. And if the posterior substances are severed from the prior,²⁴ there will be no knowledge of the ones and the others will have no being. (1031a31-b4)

I shall not dwell on these arguments because they are too narrowly confined to either the Theory of Forms or Aristotle's epistemology. The first argument concerns the proliferation of substances that results (even within the world of Ideas) from the distinction of substance and essence. The second argument points out that the assumption that a substance has no further substances and principles prior to it is undermined by the distinction of substance and essence. The third argument is that if the substances are different from their essences, then the substances will not be knowable. This latter claim rests on the Aristotelian position that "there is knowledge of each thing only when we know its essence" (1031b6-7), so that if a substance is different from its essence, and it is knowable in terms of its essence, the substance will not be knowable. This, of course, is knowledge in the strict, Aristotelian scientific sense.

The fourth argument is again one that is sound only as an argument against the Platonic Forms. It could not hold its ground either within the Aristotelian metaphysics, or in the broader philosophical spectrum. Aristotle has explained that "by 'severed' I mean, if the Idea of good has not the

²⁴ Ross/Barnes misleadingly translate "ἀπολελυμένοι ἀλλήλων" as: "And if the posterior substances are severed from one another", in Barnes (1985) p. 1628. The assumption of this argument is not that Platonic Forms are severed from one another, but that they are severed from their essences, as becomes evident both from what precedes and follows this line in the text.

essence of good, and the latter has not the property of being good” (1031b4-6). On this basis, Aristotle says that “if the essence of the good is not good, neither will the essence of being be” (1031b8-9). And since the case is the same for all Forms, if the essence of one Form does not exist (namely, of the Form of Being), nor do the essences of the rest of the Forms: “all the essences alike exist or none of them does; so that if the essence of being is not, neither will any of the others be” (1031b9-10). But even if all other assumptions were agreed to, still the argument rests on there being a Form of Being, which Aristotle was first to deny. Hence this argument will have no force in the Aristotelian system, or any subsequent system in which existence is not a property.

The final argument is the most interesting one. This argument rests on the explanation that Aristotle provides of the separateness of a substance from its essence: “the Idea of the good has not the essence of good, and the latter [the essence of good] has not the property of being good” (1031b5-6). Aristotle has already derived two consequences from this: that substances will not be knowable, and that essences will not exist. He now wants to show the metaphysical consequence that follows about substances. He says: “Again, that which has not the essence of being good is not good” (1031b11).²⁵ Namely, not only will the Idea of the good not be knowable, but, without the essence of good, i.e. without being “what it is to be good”, the Idea of good will not be good.²⁶ But “good” is just what the Idea of good is. If the paradigmatically good is not good, the theory confronts a contradiction.

²⁵ The Greek sentence here is “ἔτι ὃ μὴ ὑπάρχει ἀγαθὸν εἶναι, οὐκ ἀγαθόν”. W.D. Ross’ translation “Again, that which has not the *property* of being good is not good” (my emphasis) is misleading, since it might be read as stating that it is the essence of the good which is deprived of the property of being good. This, in fact, is Alexander’s reading of the passage, who takes the argument to be that that which is different from the Idea of the good is not good, and hence, since the essence of the good is different from the Idea of the good, the essence of the good is not good. (Alexander, *op. cit.*, 483.7-12). But this would not be objectionable for the reason that there is no prior understanding that the essence of good is good; only that the Idea of the good is good. Alexander says that “ὃ δὲ λέγει, τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν” (“Whatever it is called, such it is”, 483.9). But it is the Idea of the good, not the essence of the good, that is said to be the good. Furthermore, it would be strange if Aristotle proved first that the essence of the good does not exist (1031b9-10) and then immediately proceeded to prove that the essence of the good is not good. Ross’ position becomes clear in his commentary, where it is evident that the *property* in question (in the passage quoted above) is the essence of the good (Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 178); so he would disagree with Alexander’s reading.

²⁶ As Asclepius explains: “οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγαθὸν ὃ τινι μὴ ὑπάρχει ἀγαθὸν εἶναι” (393.17-18) –whatever does not possess “being good” is not good.

That the metaphysical separateness of a substance from its essence leads to contradiction should signal a warning sign regarding the premises of the SMA. What is common between this version of the Theory of Forms and the premises of the SMA is that in both, a substance is different from its essence. Although this would not disallow a substance to be somehow related to its essence, I will argue that their difference alone is sufficient to lead to an impossibility, and hence, that the SMA regress is vicious. I will further argue that the impossibility is not an epistemic one, as Alan Code has argued, and Frank Lewis agreed, but a metaphysical one.²⁷ The key to the discovery of the inconsistency is given to us by Aristotle, but not in Z, 6. In Z, 4, Aristotle defines essence as follows: “The essence of each thing is what it is said to be in virtue of itself”.²⁸ This shows the intimacy between *x*’s essence and *x* being an *f* in virtue of itself. *The essence of x is just what x is in virtue of itself*. Therefore, distinguishing *x* from its essence is distinguishing *x* from itself.

Understanding essence in this way, let us turn to the premises of the SMA. The definition of substance requires a substance to be an *f* in virtue of itself. Since being an *f* is the substance’s essence, it follows that the substance is its essence in virtue of *itself*. But this is *just* what is being denied by the Non-Identity Premise, which states that a substance is different from what it is to be an *f*, i.e from its essence. It follows that a substance is not its essence in virtue of *itself*. Hence, the premises of the SMA require by the definition of substance that a substance be an *f* in virtue of itself, while the Non-Identity premise denies that a substance is an *f* in virtue of itself. The premises are therefore committed to a contradiction: a substance both is, and is not, an *f* in virtue of itself.

Metaphysical Implications

The incompatibility in the premises of the SMA is fundamental. The problem it points to starts at the first step: if the essence of a substance is different from the substance, the substance is not what it is in virtue of itself, but is what it is in virtue of something other than itself; it is not a *kath’ hauto* entity, but a complex of one thing said of another. Yet substance is the *par excellence kath’ hauto* entity, so if it is not what it is in virtue of itself,

²⁷ Code argues that Aristotle found the series of essences of essences absurd because no essence would be definable, since “one cannot go through an infinite series in thought”. *op. cit.* p. 121. F. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

²⁸ “ἔστι τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι ἐκάστου ὃ λέγεται καθ’ αὐτό”, 1029b13-14.

nothing is. This would be a world of subjects which are not what they are, a world of individuals with borrowed identities. The Second Man regress does not reveal a proliferation in the ontology, but a paradox of entities in search of their nature. The *kath' hauto* requirement for substancehood is breached in the very first step of the regress, generating an impossible division, which cannot be mended in any subsequent step. To avoid it, things must not possess, or be related to their natures, but be natures themselves.

Aristotle's greatest contribution to metaphysics was to show that there is no internal structure between the subject and its nature, no nexus of instantiation separating them, and hence, no ontological division corresponding to the two logico-semantic roles of subject and essence. Substances are neither neutral loci of predication, nor complexes (finite or infinite) of one thing said of another, but are directly essences (1031b31).^{29,30}

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²⁹ “εἶναι ἓν αὐτὸς τί ἦν εἶναι.” I am therefore in disagreement with commentators who think that Aristotle had the option of avoiding the difficulties of the SMA by stopping the regress somewhere along the way, making it a finite series of essences. Alexander says: “τι κωλύει μὴ εὐθὺς ἕκαστον ταῦτόν εἶναι καὶ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ μετὰ πολλὰ τοῦτο εὐρίσκεισθαι;” (op. cit., 485,14-16); Halper says: “to avoid the infinite regress, something must be identified with its essence. But if this will be necessary at some point, why not immediately identify thing and essence . . . ?” (op. cit. p. 82); and Loux: “We are told only that, to the extent that we endorse the hypothesis that essence is *ousia*, we should be prepared to hold to the identity of object and essence at the appearance of the first essence in the series. But, of course, this is only a counsel of parsimony; it is consistent with the argument Aristotle is developing that the identification of object and essence occur at some later stage in the series” (op. cit., pp. 100-101). A. Code's interpretation rests on “the claim that a chain of essential predications cannot go on indefinitely, but this claim does not by itself contradict the claim that $E(\text{horse}) \neq E(E(\text{horse}))$ ” (op. cit., p. 121), since the identity can occur somewhere along the line of essential predications. We saw – note 15 above – that Code supplies an argument for Aristotle, to show that, not only must the identity occur somewhere along the line, but it occurs at the beginning; that is, the essence of horse is identical to the essence of the essence of horse (op. cit., p. 122). But we also saw that there is no justification for Code's basic assumption, either on *a priori* grounds, or on interpretational grounds for attributing it to Aristotle.

I have argued that the separation of a substance from its essence is incompatible with the claim that it is substance, namely, that it is what it is in virtue of itself. Hence, no substance-essence separation can be tolerated, even for a finite number of ontological steps. The reason why Aristotle says that only “ἔναι” (some entities) are directly essences is that apart from essences of substances, he wants to allow, in a secondary

sense, for essences of non-substances (1030a29-32), which do not determine what the subject is in itself.

⁴⁰ Asclepius offers an implausible interpretation of this passage. He takes it that what Aristotle means when he wonders “why should not some things be essences εὐθὺς?” is, why shouldn’t some things be essences directly, i.e. even if they do not have a name (“τί κωλύει καὶ νῦν ἓνια εἶναι εὐθὺς τί ἦν εἶναι, τουτέστιν ἄνευ ὀνόματος”, *op. cit.*, 395.24-26)! The argument has been introduced by Aristotle by supposing that we give a name to each of the essences, but Aristotle did not take this to be controversial, nor did he assign any ontological significance to it. In fact, nothing in the argument depends on there being a name for the essence, as Asclepius proceeds to explain (395.26-29). It is therefore implausible that Aristotle is referring to essences without names when he says “why should not some things be essences εὐθὺς?”.